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NGOs & UNHCR

Refugees

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Cover: NGO medical examination for a Mozambican refugee child in Malawi.
Photo © P. Toronto / Black Star.

NGOs & UNHCR

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NGOs: Our right arm

They are UNHCR's right arm, often working behind the scenes in remote and dangerous places with little or no fanfare. Without them, UNHCR would be totally impotent.

From Rwanda to Afghanistan, from Bosnia to Liberia, from Guatemala to Georgia, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are everywhere UNHCR operates. They are the ones who turn UNHCR plans into action in all the different areas of refugee assistance. In recognition of their invaluable work on behalf of refugees, UNHCR's Nansen Medal was awarded to an NGO, Medecins Sans Frontieres, in 1993.

In refugee camps, NGOs distribute food, clothing, blankets and tents. They care for the sick, bandage the wounded, set up hospitals ▶

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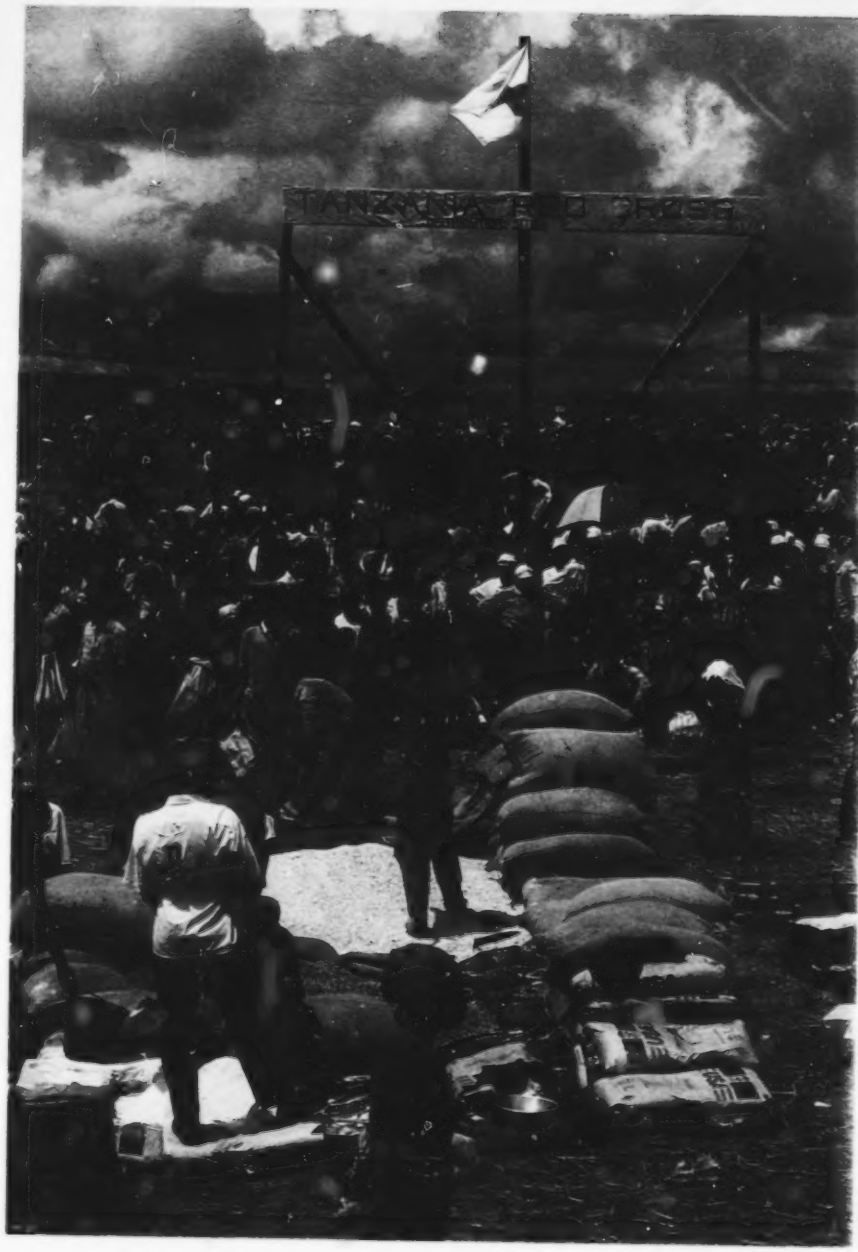

A Red Cross distribution point at Benaco camp, Tanzania. On 28 April, some 250,000 Rwandese refugees flooded across the border in 24 hours.

▶ and schools, dig latrines and drill wells. In crisis situations, they are often the only channel of information to the rest of the world.

Elsewhere, NGOs help refugees to secure the right of asylum, to find jobs and housing, to place their children in schools, to integrate in their new societies. They also help UNHCR to promote asylum standards and fair treatment of refugees.

Hundreds of thousands of NGO workers are involved directly or indirectly in alleviating the suffering of refugees. They include large international organizations such as Médecins Sans Frontières, CARE, OXFAM, Caritas, Save the Children and the International Rescue Committee, as well as smaller local agencies like National Red Cross and Red Crescent Committees.

UNHCR works in close collaboration with some 300 such organizations throughout the world. They account for more than one-quarter of UNHCR's budget – or over $300 million last year.

UNHCR's relationship with NGOs can be likened to that of an architect with sub-contractors.

"UNHCR itself does not have the hundreds of doctors needed to care for refugees from places like Somalia, Rwanda or Liberia, who flee in droves and end up wounded, sick and starving in poor neighboring countries," said Santiago Romero-Pérez, UNHCR's NGO Coordinator.

"And we don't have the fleets of trucks required to transport food and aid to refugee camps in remote areas. We don't have sufficient staff to distribute the food either, and we've never planned to do it ourselves. We have to rely on specialized humanitarian aid organizations."

The NGO role in UNHCR operations goes well beyond assistance. NGOs that are well-established in the field, for example, are a valuable source of information in a brewing emergency. "Very often, they will be the first to inform us, the only ones on the spot to defend the refugee cause before governments," noted Dessalegn Chefeke, the director of UNHCR's Regional Bureau for the Americas and the Caribbean. "Religious groups, village priests and local NGOs on the spot are the ones who first receive the refugees," he said. "Therefore, it is they who are in the best position to inform us of conditions and problems, so that we can send in a well-briefed relief team."

The NGOs also play a valuable preventive role, sounding the alarm when floods of refugees appear on the horizon. Repeated violations of human rights, signs of a poor crop or an upsurge of ethnic violence are early warnings that the NGOs are often the first to detect.

In the emergency phase of a refugee crisis, their quick intervention often saves many lives. Because of their size and flexibility, NGOs can react immediately and supply essential relief.

Thanks to the presence of the non-governmental organizations who were already working in Tanzania on 28 April of this year, scores of lives were saved among the 250,000 Rwandese refugees who crossed the border within 24 hours to escape the massacres. At the time, this was the biggest and fastest movement of refugees in the history of UNHCR.

The UNHCR relief personnel who were on site to attend to the needs of the refugees who had fled from Burundi in October 1993, in the wake of an abortive coup, would never have been able to cope alone with such a disaster.

NGOs are UNHCR's antennae. "UNHCR cannot be everywhere," admits Ivor C. Jackson, former assistant director of UNHCR's Division of International Protection. "NGOs are the ones to set off the alarm. They draw our attention to the case of a refugee who requires protection in a given country, which in turn enables us to act on his behalf before the government authorities."

As a lobby group, NGOs also play a significant role. "NGOs push governments to adopt more generous refugee policies," says Chefeke. "Their actions, press campaigns and hunger strikes compelled the U.S. government to review its position on Haitian boat-people and to stop systematic deportations. They are also the ones who act on behalf of UNHCR before the governments to secure the release of additional funds for UNHCR programs. They are a tremendous support to us."

UNHCR's partnership with NGOs dates back decades. In fact, NGOs were instrumental in the establishment of UNHCR. At the beginning of the century, following the massive migrations triggered by the Balkan wars in 1912, it was the NGOs who demanded that an international organization be set up to protect and assist refugees.

Along with the Russian Revolution and the failed counterrevolution in 1917 came the largest exodus yet – almost 1 million people – combined with population movements which followed the fall of the Ottoman Empire. And the NGOs were rapidly overwhelmed.

At that point, charity organizations gathered in Geneva and, headed by Gustave Ador, the president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, made an appeal to the League of Nations. Six months later, in August 1921, at their instigation, the League appointed the first High Commissioner for Refugees, Norwegian Fridtjof Nansen.

> "UNHCR cannnot be everywhere. NGOs are the ones to set off the alarm. They draw our attention to the case of a refugee who requires protection in a given country."

But Nansen could not act single-handedly. He did not have the neces- ▶

NGO partners around the world

By sector of activity as of April 1994

Sectors	AFRICA	ASIA & OCEANIA	EUROPE & NORTH AMERICA	LATIN AMERICA	*SWANAME
Food	26	13	1	11	4
Transport and Logistics	46	16	2	17	14
Domestic needs Household support	32	15	9	27	11
Water (non-agricultural)	22	9	–	5	9
Sanitation	21	9	–	5	13
Health - Nutrition	55	28	8	29	21
Shelter Other infrastructure	28	14	–	11	19
Community services	32	17	18	12	10
Education	42	27	4	21	16
Crop production	24	1	–	5	1
Livestock - Animal husbandry	3	–	3	–	–
Fisheries	2	–	2	–	–
Forestry	5	–	2	–	2
Income generation	26	4	3	21	11
Legal assistance Protection	13	12	17	19	2
Agency operational support	45	24	5	30	32

*South-West Asia, North Africa, Middle East

▶ sary funding. The League had only granted him a few thousand pounds sterling to pay his staff. When he took up office on 1 September 1921, he had to appeal to the charitable organizations to help the Russian refugees scattered throughout the Balkans.

Later, when the issue of broadening the High Commissioner's mandate arose, some 30 non-governmental organizations took part in drafting the 1951 Convention. Cooperation between NGOs and UNHCR was even enshrined in the Statute. Indeed, Article 8 of the Statute provides that UNHCR must seek solutions to the refugees' problems in collaboration with, among others, non-governmental organizations.

"At the outset," Jackson said, "NGOs were mainly national in scope: each one took on responsibility for a specific group of refugees belonging to a given nationality. Local NGOs actually provided the assistance – housing, jobs, schools – whereas, international NGOs were involved essentially in resettling. They would even put together refugees' applications. These were for the most part the major church-sponsored NGOs (the World Council of Churches, the Lutheran World Federation, the Quaker International Affairs Center, the National Catholic Welfare Conference) which had extensive contacts throughout the world that proved priceless in resettlement operations."

In the course of time, collaboration between NGOs and UNHCR intensified and changed with the explosion in refugee numbers.

Twenty-five years ago, there were 2.5 million refugees in the world. Today, there are 23 million, not including the 25 to 30 million displaced people. At present, UNHCR works with 104 NGOs in Africa, 85 in Europe, 66 in Asia, 45 in Latin America, and 55 in the Middle East in areas such as health, education, food supply, water supply, shelter, transportation and legal aid.

However, past and present relations between UNHCR and NGOs have not always been perfectly harmonious. At times they are difficult, even tense – due in part to their different roles. Moreover, NGOs have no specific mandate and can subsequently adopt a more flexible approach.

"NGOs do not always understand our constraints," UNHCR's Chefeke explained. "They often criticize, without realizing that, while a given solution we put forth for a specific case may not be ideal, it is often the lesser of evils and the best for the refugees."

In addition, UNHCR's bureaucracy, its red tape, the delays in making decisions, are nothing but obstacles for NGOs in effectively carrying out operations. "And this is serious in a crisis situation in which the lives of refugees are at stake," said Delma Blasco, executive director of the International Council of Volunteer Agencies (ICVA).

NGOs often feel that they are being under-utilized, while, on the other hand, actions launched by some ill-prepared NGOs can jeopardize UNHCR operations. In an effort in which no one would dare question the generous intention, but which lacked vision, some NGOs with no preparation evacuated children and sick people from the territory of ex-Yugoslavia, thereby complicating further UNHCR's task. Some of these children reached foreign countries without official documents or identification. Today, relocating their families has become a nightmare for UNHCR, ICRC and others who are left to clean up the mess.

However, these differences are not necessarily incompatible. "Our roles, though different, are complementary, making us ideal partners," High Commissioner Sadako Ogata told a 6 June meeting of nearly 200 NGOs in Oslo.

Unlike UNHCR, NGOs are for the most part not financed by governments and enjoy a measure of independence that UNHCR has never had. Moreover, if humanitarian assistance is to be effective, there must be an international organization in charge of coordinating efforts and avoiding duplication.

"As we cannot do anything in isolation, let us attempt to build together on our differences," said Jean-Noël Wetterwald, a former chief of the UNHCR NGO Section and now UNHCR representative in Indonesia. "Let us join our strengths since basically we share the same objectives: to protect and assist refugees. Given the magnitude and frequency of crises, now is the time to review our collaboration to ensure greater efficiency."

From this idea the PARinAC (Partnership in Action) broad consulta-

Teaching Spanish to Guatemalan Indians in Keste camp, Campeche, Mexico.

UNHCR/ H. J. Davies

tion process emerged, spanning 12 months and culminating in a summit meeting in Oslo in June. "These conferences have enabled all to appreciate and better understand each other's role and mandates, to reduce the level of tension and suspicion, and above all to pave the way for the future," said Gil Loescher, an academic who specializes in refugee issues and a UNHCR consultant for the PARinAC consultations.

Following the unprecedented scale of refugee movements over the past few years – between 1989 and 1992, more than 82 wars have broken out, 79 of which derived from internal conflicts – UNHCR must face new challenges which it cannot take on alone. "Our partnership with the NGOs is an essential element in our humanitarian strategy for the coming years," stated Mrs. Ogata in Oslo.

Such a partnership also relies, among other things, on strengthening NGOs, especially local ones.

The crucial part played by international NGOs is well established, while the invaluable role of the local NGOs is much less so. Very often, the local NGOs are entrusted with the lower profile work, laying out the boundaries of a camp, unloading and distributing tents, digging latrines, building roads, drilling wells and writing reports. Once the refugees' survival is ensured, the local NGOs then help them to improve their living conditions, offering them education, income-generating activities, social services and other programs.

Because of their wealth of experience and efficiency, UNHCR often calls upon the major international organizations when a crisis situation arises. These have the necessary staff and resources to react at the shortest notice to pressing refugee needs. But once the crisis is under control, the international NGOs often withdraw. They pack up and leave the scene of disaster to tend to another emergency situation somewhere else. Someone must fill the gap they leave behind. Local NGOs remain on the spot and take over.

> Perceived as a nuisance, NGOs do not always enjoy the trust of governments.

But these are less favored than their major international counterparts. They cannot draw on the same resources, hence cannot grow at the same pace. Fortunately, an increasing number of international NGOs, aware of their own limitations, hire helpers locally and train personnel on the spot. UNHCR encourages this type of initiative.

Local NGOs do indeed have a number of intrinsic advantages over the international relief organizations: they speak the same language as the refugees they are assisting and know their culture and their traditions as well as local susceptibilities. Their personal commitment tends to be stronger – after all, it is their country and future which are at stake.

NGOs can also consider problems in a broader context. United Nations specialized agencies such as UNHCR are limited by their very mandate. Thus UNHCR is not a development agency. NGOs can bridge the gap, acting as the missing link.

Some countries have not readily accepted NGO involvement. Others are only just starting to work with them. Perceived as a nuisance, NGOs do not always enjoy the trust of governments. UNHCR, in collaboration with a number of NGOs, is embarking on a major information scheme in the former communist bloc countries, where it has proven difficult to explain how private organizations can take up where the welfare state leaves off.

Given the proliferation of crises and the limitations of resources on all sides, the future will demand enhanced cooperation and coordination between NGOs and UNHCR for the greater benefit of refugees. As UNHCR's Romero-Perez puts it, "The more effectiveness the NGOs can muster, the better we will be able to do ourselves."

Christiane Berthiaume

An orphanage at Barakai refugee village, Pakistan, run by the Islamic Relief Agency.

Partnership in Action

Forty-five years ago, when the debate at United Nations headquarters centered on what type of agency would be responsible for the world's refugee problem, perhaps inadvertently, the relationship which UNHCR would have with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) was being established. How would the new agency carry out its dual mandate of protecting and assisting refugees? The compromise which won the day – a humanitarian agency outside the political considerations of the U.N. Secretariat, capable of acting independently – mandated UNHCR to seek durable solutions to the refugee problem by assisting governments and, subject to their approval, private voluntary organizations to carry out these tasks.

UNHCR's Statute, adopted by the U.N. General Assembly in December 1950, mandated UNHCR to work with NGOs. This far-sighted decision allowed the first High Commissioner to receive and disburse funds through governments and NGOs, giving them the responsibility for the use of these funds in specific projects.

From its creation, one of UNHCR's main responsibilities, to provide assistance towards durable solutions, was linked, in a statutory manner, with NGOs.

The new agency, non-political and humanitarian, began its task alongside NGOs, relying on their knowledge and expertise to carry out its refugee programs. This relationship with NGOs became fundamental to the success of UNHCR's work.

The NGO role in relation to UNHCR's principal task, to provide international protection to refugees, is frequently misunderstood. NGOs are often seen as UNHCR's operational arm, as deliverers of assistance, rather than as a source of support for UNHCR's protection tasks. There was a tendency in UNHCR to think that because the responsibility to provide international protection cannot be delegated, NGOs were assigned to a narrowly defined realm of assistance.

The increasing complexity and size of the refugee problem, and the growing needs of displaced persons inside and outside their own countries, have required enormous changes for UNHCR. The new world "disorder" has required new strategies and a search for association with a wider segment of society, interested and involved in the search for solutions. The relationship with NGOs has, therefore, grown in quantitative terms to a level where in 1993 UNHCR channeled some $300 million, directly or indirectly, through NGOs. This relationship has also grown in terms of the number of NGOs working with UNHCR – some 300 in 1993 – and in the diversity of their involvement. UNHCR's strategy of prevention, preparedness and solutions has necessitated greater NGO involvement, not only as "implementing partners" but as sources of information, advocates of refugee rights, and important voices in policy formulation.

How has UNHCR traditionally related to NGOs? As much of UNHCR's work is field-oriented, the choice of operational partners is entrusted to our field representatives, who liaise with local and international NGOs on a daily basis, and are well placed to assess the needs and determine which agencies are best suited for program delivery.

The selection criteria has been from the beginning quite simple, based on operational capacity and accountability. The three basic conditions require NGOs:

- to be legally registered at the location of their headquarters and/or where they operate;
- to have authority to operate a bank account and keep separate records of expenditures incurred on UNHCR's behalf;
- and to demonstrate, via official audit statements, financial reliability.

The varied nature of refugee situations requires flexibility in the choice of partners; some additional considerations include past experience, local expertise, rapid response capacity and phase-out potential.

The United Nation's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) permits NGOs to which it has granted consultative status, as well as members of the Commission on Refugees of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA), to submit statements and participate as observers in the annual session of UNHCR's Executive Committee.

As the challenges to refugee protection and assistance increased, so did the need to re-examine relations with NGOs, recognizing our respective roles and mandates. In 1990, UNHCR embarked, together with ICVA, on a dialogue with NGOs to reappraise the fundamental nature of the partnership. This exercise, which involved some 200 NGOs and 20 UNHCR field offices, led to the recognition that NGOs were more than mere "implementing partners" or "deliverers of service," and emphasized UNHCR-NGO complementary capacities. It also resulted in a document entitled, "UNHCR-NGO Partnership: Reference on Relationship Between UNHCR and NGOs." This important document, while calling for improved cooperation at field and headquarters level, did not, however, cover every area of potential partnership. It lacked a broader input, especially from local NGOs.

In order to widen the dialogue and improve our actions, in 1993 UNHCR and ICVA initiated the partnership process known as PARinAC (Partnership in Action). A series of six regional consultations began in Caracas in June 1993, and was followed by others in Kathmandu, Tunis, Bangkok, Addis Ababa and Budapest. The process culminated in a Global Conference in Oslo in June 1994. Supplementary consulta-

tions with NGOs also took place in Tokyo, Toronto, Washington, London and New York.

Taking the "show on the road," UNHCR went to the South, but also East, West and North. Common issues of concern were discussed with people in the field. Over 500 NGOs from every continent, especially local NGOs, took part in the process.

The consultations centered around five priority areas: refugee protection, internally displaced, emergency preparedness and response, the continuum from relief to rehabilitation to development, and UNHCR-NGO partnership. Each regional conference viewed these themes through the prism of their own regional or local specificities and produced sets of proposals on concrete measures to improve our relations and the response to refugees and displaced persons.

The PARinAC Global Conference in Oslo included 182 NGO representatives from 83 countries, as well as observers from U.N. and other intergovernmental bodies, and government members of our Executive Committee. The meeting adopted by consensus the Oslo Declaration and Plan of Action and endorsed the regional proposals from all the conferences. We see the Plan of Action, which includes 134 recommendations, as the blueprint which will guide our response to present and future humanitarian challenges. The following examples illustrate the origins and aims of a few of the PARinAC recommendations.

• The growing recognition of NGOs' role as advocates of refugee protection, requires enhanced NGO participation in dialogue with governments and appropriate information sharing. This need is reflected in the introduction to the protection recommendations in the Oslo Plan of Action and more specifically in recommendations 1 and 2.

• An NGO presence before an emergency occurs or in its early phase is of great value in improving early warning and the initial emergency response. At present, local NGOs are often not able to become involved because of a series of financial, administrative and/or operational handicaps. Recommendation 75 addresses this situation.

• UNHCR and NGOs often complain about each other's "deficiencies" when it comes to project implementation. Some in UNHCR believe that project agreements are the basis of partnership and that NGO delays in complying with agreed reporting requirements are the cause of many of our differences. The PARinAC process has started a reform dialogue; most concretely, some 35 NGO representatives from Africa met with UNHCR officials immediately after the PARinAC regional conference in Addis Ababa, to propose improvements. Oslo recommendations 65-72 refer to program reform and NGO involvement in this process.

• The need for better coordination is clearly recognized. This applies not only to UNHCR-NGO relations but also to relations between NGOs. Recommendation 61 calls for the establishment of committees to assess specific requirements before, during and after a refugee crisis emerges.

• How long is UNHCR presence required in a given refugee or returnee situation? Often the absence of other organizations and lack of resources results in a prolonged UNHCR presence. Recommendation 106 calls for a smooth phase-out period in which local NGOs are supported and other partners – government authorities, development agencies and donors – are called to play an active role.

• The need for an appropriate response to the growing problem of the internally displaced was a priority issue during PARinAC. There is no agency with a mandate to protect and assist internally displaced people. Recommendation 41 addresses institutional arrangements and calls on the U.N. Secretary-General to designate a lead agency in specific situations. More importantly, however, it calls for the broad, coordinated involvement of UNHCR, governmental and inter-governmental authorities and NGOs to address the problem.

The High Commissioner, in her keynote address in Oslo, called for bold initiatives to make this new partnership work. She offered to bring NGOs into operational and program discussions; to strengthen, through training, local agencies' response capacity; to undertake joint needs assessment of regional training requirements and approach donors for the necessary funds; to involve NGOs in formulation of programs in all relevant areas, including emergency response, repatriation, protection and internally displaced; to strengthen information sharing; and to cooperate with NGOs in the incorporation of issues concerning refugee women and children in all our program activities.

The NGOs have already designated focal points at both regional and national levels to begin turning the PARinAC recommendations into reality and are busy preparing the agenda for the first ever consultation between NGOs and States members of UNHCR's Executive Committee.

Structural changes will also take place in UNHCR headquarters, where senior officials in each regional bureau will be responsible for discussing operational matters with NGOs. On August 1st, a coordinator, responsible for policy matters related to NGOs replaced the NGO Liaison Section, created in 1975, within the division of external relations.

This new partnership will have to overcome old working habits. It will require real commitment from both UNHCR and NGOs to address the problems of refugees and displaced persons as a team. It will need the involvement of other U.N. agencies and programs, as well as political and financial cooperation of governments.

The challenge is great, the agenda is set, the tools have been identified. It is imperative that we succeed.

Santiago Romero-Perez
UNHCR NGO Coordinator

Priceless trash

Like many 13-year-old boys, Filip Andronik enjoys collecting things. But Filip's collection does not contain the usual postage stamps, coins or colored rocks. Filip prefers to collect humanitarian trash.

Since the beginning of the war in Sarajevo in the spring of 1992, Filip has saved hundreds of empty boxes, jars, cartons, bags, sacks, tubes, bottles and wrappers received by his family as humanitarian aid from UNHCR, various non-governmental organizations and even a few relatives abroad.

Filip lives with his mother and brother on the third floor of a shell-scarred apartment block in the Sarajevo suburb of Dobrinja, the scene of very heavy fighting for much of the war. Plastic sheeting bearing the imprint of UNHCR covers the bomb-damaged windows of his family's flat.

When the first UNHCR convoy rolled into Sarajevo in the early days of the war, Filip, then 11, decided to start his collection. Today, it provides a colorful record of the tens of thousands of tons of aid items ranging from woolen socks to wheat flour provided by the international community through UNHCR and its partners.

Filip has high hopes for his unique collection.

"I'm going to get into the Guinness Book of Records by collecting packaging left over from humanitarian aid," Filip said. "And I'll show people how much we've received and what we had to live on."

Filip, who with his friends also collects spent bullets and shell fragments, worked hard to build and maintain his prized collection. He would often sneak out of the apartment while his mother was away to get water from a community well to clean the plastic, metal and paper wrappers.

He stores his collection in UNHCR cartons and flour bags. Each large cardboard carton is stamped with big red hearts. Filip makes the heart design out of raw potatoes. Anyone who knows how much potatoes cost in Sarajevo will at once understand how sincerely he believes in what he has written on the cartons next to the hearts: "I love humanitarian aid."

The collection is tangible proof for Filip and his family that they have not been forgotten by the world. And it gave Filip something to do during many long days and nights filled with the terrifying sound of shelling and gunfire. Filip's school has been destroyed. Now and then a teacher gives lessons in a private house, but most of the past two years have been spent at home.

Filip often spreads out his beloved collection on the floor of the small room which he shares with his older brother. At last count he had collected 51 cans and 484 bags and boxes. He also has some toothpaste tubes. He only collects wrappers from aid received by his family.

Filip said that during the first three months of the war, everybody spent all their time in the cellar. Beans, home-baked bread and noodles were all they had to eat. Then, once the aid began rolling in, they got cheese, tuna fish, corned beef and sometimes even chocolate.

> "I'm going to get into the Guinness Book of Records... I'll show people how much we've received and what we had to live on."

For much of the war, no one knew when another convoy with humanitarian aid would arrive in their neighborhood, or when a package for them had come in. They had to keep going to the distribution center to find out – even when there was shooting. Neighbors would pass along any information they could gather.

Since the recent cease-fire, it has been different. Families are told by telephone when they can come to the distribution center to collect their next aid package.

Most of the aid was brought in by the humanitarian airlift coordinated by UNHCR and the U.N. Protection Force, and by UNHCR convoys.

Filip doesn't know of anyone else in Sarajevo who has a similar collection. But he knows that humanitarian aid has become a focus in the lives of nearly all of Sarajevo's 380,000 residents. Without such help they couldn't have survived, Filip said.

And how long will Filip continue collecting? "Until the war's over," he replies. And when will that be? "When there is no more need for humanitarian aid."

Ursula Meissner

Filip, surrounded by part of his collection, says he'll know the war is over when there is no more need for humanitarian aid.

Cooperation crucial in Rwanda crisis

Whether approached from the air or by land, Benaco camp is impressive. Blue UNHCR plastic sheeting, covering tens of thousands of makeshift huts, contrasts with the lush green landscape for as far as the eye can see.

On 28 April, some 250,000 Rwandese flooded into Tanzania near the town of Ngara in one single human wave – at the time, it was the biggest and fastest refugee movement UNHCR had ever witnessed.

"On that day, we took the road leading to the border to evaluate the situation," recalled Maureen Connelly, in charge of the UNHCR Emergency Unit in Tanzania. "Suddenly, we were facing a line of refugees 8-12 kilometers long. Nobody expected it. Our car couldn't go on. There were people everywhere."

Jacques Franquin, coordinator of UNHCR activities in Ngara, remembers his initial reaction to the huge influx was to call his NGO colleagues. "The Rusumo road was just one compact mass of people, like a flow of lava descending inexorably toward the Tanzanian border," Franquin said. "I rushed to my radio and called Medecins Sans Frontières to quickly send us reinforcements, supplies and, above all, a water provision specialist. Joël Boulanger of MSF jumped into a car and arrived at Benaco together with David Trevino, also of MSF. They worked all night to provide a minimum of drinking water to the refugees."

UNHCR / H. Caux

Several NGOs work at Benaco camp, Tanzania. Each forms a part in a big puzzle coordinated by UNHCR.

Thanks to constant cooperation from non-governmental organizations, UNHCR managed to cope with the arrival of this human tide and saved many lives.

"The cooperation between UNHCR and the NGOs in this emergency situation was almost perfect," said Franquin. "We had an enormous advantage. We were already here and waiting. So were the NGOs. We had been working together on a project for Burundi refugees and knew each other well. So it was very easy to get organized and deal with the exodus of Rwandese. Because of this, we gained a lot of time. In similar situations, the UNHCR and ▶

Thanks to cooperation from NGOs, UNHCR managed to cope with the arrival of this human tide and saved many lives.

▶ NGO teams are not really operational until two or three weeks after arriving. In this case, we could respond from the first day on. We gained three precious weeks."

"You can't set up a town of 250,000 inhabitants like the camp at Benaco without a lot of help," Connelly added. "And I think what was done was beyond what one could ever have imagined. The task accomplished by a rather reduced number of aid workers was a miracle."

But the choice of Benaco hill as the site of what was then the world's biggest refugee camp had nothing to do with chance. There is an artificial lake at the foot of the site. Every day, a million liters of water are pumped from it and treated before being distributed to the refugees. Each person gets five liters of drinking water per day, which is too little by UNHCR standards but enough, it seems, to fill the needs of the camp. The MSF and OXFAM teams handle the treatment and distribution of water.

More than 15 NGOs work at the Benaco site. Each one is a piece of a puzzle managed by UNHCR, and each one has its speciality.

The management of fresh and non-perishable food stocks has been assigned to CARE, which supplies the other agencies responsible for actual distribution to the refugees.

Concern, an Irish NGO, helps take care of camp management, while MSF Netherlands is responsible for the construction of latrines. Tanganyika Christian Refugee Services provides transportation.

Most certainly, the presence at Benaco of UNHCR and the NGOs from the very start of the crisis made it possible to avoid a catastrophe. But chance too played a part.

For once, the refugees did not set out in a hurry, and were able to flee with enough supplies to get them through the first few crucial days of the crisis. This was not the first time many of them had fled turmoil in the troubled region, and their past experience taught them to take along some vital supplies; a jerry can of water, a little food – enough to keep going until the arrival of the first convoys of food aid. This gave the international community a few extra hours to mobilize.

A tremendous humanitarian operation was started up in record time, thanks in part to convenient positioning of equipment and supplies. The European Community, for example, interrupted the construction of a road it was financing in the Ngara region and diverted the engineering equipment to Benaco.

"Without the help of this construction company," Connelly said, "we could never have organized the Benaco site so quickly. We should always be able to count on such a team and on engineering material for all large-scale emergency operations like this one."

Despite the early successes, the battle has not yet been won. Big problems are an everyday fact of life here. Just to avoid starvation, some 200 tons of food must be shipped to Benaco each and every day.

"It's a very challenging task," said Marco Onorado, of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), which is responsible for food distribution. "We can only distribute food to 100,000 people a day. So we give them their rations for three days – corn, beans, and sometimes oil."

At the beginning of the crisis, trucks were unloaded and their cargo distributed immediately. It was all done outdoors. There were no reserve stocks or storehouses. Today, huge tents have been erected as storage facilities, each holding up to 400 tons of supplies.

But the situation is nonetheless fragile. "With a population at the camp that doesn't stop growing, we are always in a precarious situation," said the IFRC's Onorado. "The provisions depend mainly on the World Food Program (WFP), which very often can't tell us exactly what's in the pipeline. Our worry is running out of supplies."

As WFP knows all too well, logistics can be a nightmare in a country as big as Tanzania, where road and rail systems leave much to be desired — particularly in remote areas like Ngara.

Supplying the camp with fresh provisions is only the tip of a monstrous iceberg. Add to that the problems of hygiene, the prevention of epidemics, the search for new sources of water, and the security problems inherent in a population of hundreds of thousands of refugees, and you get an idea of the enormity of the task.

Each NGO has a well-defined role at Benaco, a role that should not duplicate or interfere with the work of others. In theory, such clearly defined job descriptions should eliminate most problems. But theory does not always reflect reality. Hans Husselman, a UNHCR consultant on water problems, often has to resolve this dilemma. "One NGO drills successfully for underground water and, as a rule, another one is to install the pumps and take care of distribution," Husselman said. "The organization that found the water is, of course, tempted to give its opinion on the best way to manage the natural resources it helped discover. In the last resort, it is up to me to settle differences, but all that takes diplomacy."

The stakes are, in fact, important

"In an emergency situation like this, there is no place for rivalry. Everyone goes ahead and does his job."

for the NGOs. Benaco camp, which rapidly became one of the largest "cities" in Tanzania, is a showcase for the organizations working there. Not a day goes by without a visit by an official delegation. Knowing that their financial resources depend essentially on donations, are some NGOs inclined to want to do too much, creating rivalries? "No," is the emphatic reply from UNHCR's Connelly. "Confronted with the sheer size of the task, everyone is too busy just trying to deal with the most immediate, urgent work. There's no time to create new problems. My only fear is for the future. The teams will change and the cooperative spirit that prevailed in the beginning could perhaps disappear."

The NGOs agree. "In an emergency situation like this one," Gary McClain of CARE points out, "there is no place for rivalry. Everyone goes ahead and does his job. We don't have time for politics. What is happening here is an excellent example of the response one can make to an emergency situation when everybody works together."

Connelly says meetings and more meetings are essential for resolving problems and facilitating communication between UNHCR and the NGOs. They not only serve to reduce tensions but also to fix priorities and establish common strategies.

At Benaco, for example, the health unit meets twice a week. And on Tuesdays and Saturdays, a coordination meeting brings together representatives from all NGOs and UNHCR. "I have at least three meetings a day, most often five," said Anne Vincent of MSF. "It's a heavy meeting schedule, but it's also indispensable if one wants information to circulate. Meetings are the ideal tool for harmonizing the work of the different NGOs. There are no miracles, and these meetings are necessary."

With a population of hundreds of thousands, Benaco is on the verge of suffocating. To help ease the congestion, new camps are being created – Lumasi, Msuhura and Kayonza.

So the work goes on, day by day, problem by problem. So far, UNHCR and its NGO partners have more than met the challenge.

Philippe Lamair

At Benaco, Oxfam and MSF are responsible for treatment and distribution of water. Here, Rwandese refugees assemble a reservoir provided by Oxfam.

New challenge, new vision

The Partnership in Action (PARinAC) process, which culminated with the June 1994 conference in Oslo, is an example of how UNHCR and the NGOs have again reviewed their relationship in order to see if it responds adequately to the new challenges of today's refugee situation. It involves an honest critique of the partnership, an assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, and recommendations for new approaches.

The strengths and weaknesses in the UNHCR-NGO partnership are not always easy to determine since what is a weakness in one refugee situation may be a strength in another. Relations may also vary from place to place due to differences in attitude between individuals staffing UNHCR or NGO field offices.

There is, however, a certain consensus about the aspects of the partnership that have recently been proving problematic. Very briefly these may be summarized as follows:

Over the years, UNHCR, in responding to continually evolving refugee situations, as well as its fundamental task of refugee protection, has tended to concentrate on developing its operational capacity and structures for providing material assistance to refugees.

This trend in UNHCR towards constant growth in staff and budgets geared to assistance needs has been problematic in that it has made the organization heavier and at times less suited to performing its traditional role. In addition to meeting the increasing challenges of rapid response and disaster prevention, the organization's ability to fulfill the primary task of its mandate, that of refugee protection, may be jeopardized.

This is especially true of UNHCR's overall performance in Europe, where the lack of a proper strategy – such as a comprehensive plan of action and adequate responses to the many restrictive government measures aimed at refugees – has affected European NGOs' confidence in UNHCR's refugee protection efforts.

The NGOs, on the other hand, sometimes work in isolation, and try to protect their own turf. They also have a tendency to proliferate without always ensuring they do not overlap with each other or, conversely, that they are covering all the elements necessary for sustainable solutions.

Even though resources have grown sparser compared with the needs of the refugees, it took years before the NGOs began to coordinate efficiently and accept UNHCR as the focal point for cooperation – for example in Thailand and the Horn of Africa. Some NGOs seem to have difficulties in believing they can maintain their identity, fulfil the expectations of their constituencies and continue to raise more money if they cooperate actively with other agencies.

UNHCR-NGO cooperation is often governed by separate implementation agreements between UNHCR and many different NGOs. This can result in cumbersome administration and an incoherent approach to solving the particular problems raised by different refugee operations.

Given the increasing complexity of today's refugee crises and the sheer volume of humanitarian tasks facing international agencies and NGOs, PARinAC was not only timely but unavoidably necessary.

In general PARinAC fulfilled its aims. Constructive recommendations were made concerning UNHCR-NGO cooperation based on real partnership in all aspects of national, regional and international refugee protection and assistance.

UNHCR and the hundreds of NGO participants committed themselves to closer, more open collaboration in all phases of refugee

The NGOs sometimes work in isolation and try to protect their own turf.

In Sarajevo, a staff member of the German NGO, Cap Anamur, helps a patient. The elderly are often the most traumatized of war victims.

UNHCR A. Hollmann

programs, from planning and training through implementation to evaluation. The underlying principles of transparency and accountability were stressed.

The continued success of PARinAC now depends on whether the new spirit and new forms of cooperation embedded in the Oslo recommendations are communicated to all corners of the UNHCR-NGO partnership, and whether they are received in the same spirit of cooperation in which they were born.

Already, NGO follow-up committees have been established with the aim of working out, together with UNHCR's regional offices, how to implement the Oslo recommendations, and further develop and sustain the closer relations that resulted from the regional PARinAC conferences that prededed Oslo.

The Oslo recommendations also inject fresh energy and ideas into existing initiatives and relations. Thus, a number of refugee councils and other NGOs have, over the last couple of years, been devising new approaches to traditional UNHCR-NGO structures of cooperation which would be more flexible and efficient, and meet the need to bridge gaps and grey areas in the continuum of refugee assistance.

The new ideas include a type of broker mechanism in the form of a "Consortium Clearing House." This would bring together NGOs and U.N. agencies with the aim of ensuring that, when a refugee crisis occurs, the right blend of people and organizations are in the right place at the right time. The Clearing House ▶

UNHCR / J. Gaze

UNHCR / A. Hollmann

UNHCR / A. Hollmann

Above left :
A Handicap International worker helps fit and test a prosthesis in Cambodia.

Above right :
Bhutanese refugees in an Oxfam-sponsored knitting project in Timai camp, Nepal.

Left :
A worker for Catholic Office for Emergency Relief and Refugees (COERR) teaches electronics and other vocational subjects to Laotian refugees at Ban Napho, Thailand.

▶ structure could include a board of representatives from UNHCR, UNDP, other U.N. agencies and international NGO bodies such as ICVA, as well as regional NGO structures.

UNHCR, which is often the lead agency in such situations, would then be able to draw on resources specifically tailored to the crisis in question. Such a consortium could help prevent unnecessary overlap between NGOs offering similar skills and, more importantly, ensure that vital sectors – water, health, sanitation, shelter – are not neglected simply because, as sometimes happens now, no NGO with the required expertise comes forward to offer its services. It could also help smooth out the transition from initial relief via development assistance to durable solutions.

While a similar process occurs now, it tends to be more haphazard, and its overall efficiency varies considerably from one crisis to the next. Earlier NGO participation in overall planning would help identify problems associated with and compensate for, say, a lack (or a glut) of local NGOs, or particularly difficult or little-known terrain.

An essential element of the "clearing" process would be a databank containing detailed information about organizations, experts and support staff, their specialized know-how and their availability, along the lines of the so-called "refugee relief map" suggested by UNHCR. Accumulated evaluation and experiences would also be fed back into the clearing house databank where, by adding to, or correcting, existing information, it would further improve the fertile mass of data that could then be tapped in a continual effort to improve performance.

The databank would not be limited to information from and about associated agencies and individuals or officially recognized NGOs, but would also include information on knowledgable local people and agencies, and in some cases people who have themselves been refugees.

The model described above implies changes in traditional roles and would introduce new partners. The participation of agencies such as UNDP and the World Bank will hopefully ensure that refugee assistance may happen in a continuum without gaps and grey areas, and that work will continue long after UNHCR has phased out because of the limits imposed by its mandate and restricted funding.

In addition, UNHCR's problematic, direct involvement in operations might gradually be replaced by a more mediatory overall role coordinating, facilitating and monitoring operations. The actual running of the many and varied refugee operations involved would then be in the hands of local and regional NGOs.

For UNHCR, this model implies honoring the enormous and specialized field expertise that many NGOs possess and which they transfer and adapt when shifting operations from one region of the world to another, for example from Central America to Viet Nam, Cambodia or Mozambique.

> Refugee work is often so complex that no single organization can possibly master all its disciplines.

NGO staff often have broader and longer experience than UNHCR staff. On the other hand, the model also honors and makes better use of UNHCR's expertise in overall planning and conceptualization.

It also makes maximum use of the close contact that local and regional NGOs have with the refugees, and their ability to mobilize resources within the refugee and local communities.

Such an approach would show greater respect for the views and aspirations of the refugees themselves, which would be channelled through NGO staff who have direct daily contact with individual refugees.

This new vision would also imply the need for NGOs to honor UNHCR's responsibility for overall coordination, as well as requiring disciplined coordination among NGOs themselves. At times it would also mean having to accept the fact that some NGOs are better equipped than others to deal with particular refugee situations. It will facilitate indigenous NGOs' active participation in program planning and implementation. This in turn will make UNHCR more inclined to work with them as partners, knowing that through the consortia system and databank, local NGOs can be supplemented with additional outside expertise. Similarly, this injection of expertise should encourage local NGOs to take part in controversial refugee problems, with obvious cultural and skill-transferal benefits for all involved. These local organizations will then be able gradually to join a worldwide network of experienced refugee-workers available to UNHCR.

This partnership initiative, devised by a group of NGOs and in many ways further encouraged by the PARinAC process, requires the recognition by the many and varied partners of their differences, in which – if the most appropriate permutations and combinations are used – lies their greatest strength.

It is important for us in any given refugee situation to identify those aspects of organizational and individual know-how which need to be further developed or strengthened, be it in local NGOs, in experienced international NGOs, or among planning experts, administrators, U.N. diplomats and UNHCR protection officers.

Refugee work is often so complex that no single organization can possibly master all its disciplines. Together we can achieve much more if we can complement and balance each other, in addition to mobilizing the resources which the refugees themselves possess. Such an attitude and approach should bring greater benefits to the people at whom all these efforts are aimed – the refugees and the displaced.

Danish Refugee Council

What they think of us

"UNHCR is, without doubt, the United Nations agency with whom we have the best working relations. NGOs and UNHCR have been working together for so many years. We know each other well. We have developed great know-how. We have accumulated much experience. BUT..."

There is, in fact, a big "but" concerning UNHCR-NGO relations, according to Delmar Blasco, Executive Director of the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). Collaboration has evolved with the passing of time and the ever increasing number of refugee crises in the world, but not always as harmoniously as would have been desirable.

The complaints most often made about UNHCR by the voluntary agencies focus on bureaucracy and lack of communication.

"As a matter of fact," explains Gil Loescher, a specialist in refugee issues and UNHCR consultant for PARinAC, "the NGOs reproach UNHCR for its lack of openness, transparency and communication. Quite often, NGOs in the field do not know who to turn to when they want to make comments or suggestions."

The contact person for NGOs in the field is usually the person in charge of the implementation of UNHCR programs. "However," says Loescher, "he is already overloaded with work and cannot give enough time to the NGOs."

Delmar Blasco believes that "working with NGOs calls for a certain state of mind. UNHCR staff do not always understand this. They are so used to dealing with government officials that they do not differentiate between them and the NGOs. They do not understand that the NGO approach is not the same. That does not mean it is necessarily better – even though this is very often the case. It is simply different. To avoid conflict, UNHCR should make sure it places people in the field who know how to negotiate with NGOs, who know and understand their role."

In order to make operations more effective, NGOs would like to be consulted sooner and more often. "For that," says Loescher, "the communications network should be improved, and information disseminated in appropriate languages. The NGOs complain, in fact, about UNHCR's hermetic language."

> The complaints most often made about UNHCR by the voluntary agencies focus on bureaucracy and lack of communication

The litany of criticism frequently centers on UNHCR's bureaucratic practices. "To take a decision in UNHCR is always a difficult and painful exercise," Blasco said. "The officials fear the reactions of their boss or worry about their career.

"The piles of forms that have to be filled in is also overwhelming," he continued. "To fill them in takes too much time and energy, which means too much money. They are so incomprehensible that some people sign them without really knowing what they are about. Of course, it is necessary to take control measures to prevent abuse, but the system could be made less burdensome."

Funding is another bone of contention. Traditionally, governments have been UNHCR's principal donors while NGO funds came from private donations. However, sources have been shifting in recent years. Some NGOs are now partly financed by public funds. In addition, the increasing number of refugees, coupled with the decreasing resources of donor states suffering from economic recession, have obliged UNHCR to seek more private donations.

Through the PARinAC exercise, NGOs have been able to assess their grievances and UNHCR has, in turn, formulated certain responses.

With regard to funding, UNHCR and NGOs will intensify their collaboration in order to adopt strategies that will be complementary rather than competitive. These include, among other things, the possibility of making common appeals for funds.

To improve collaboration and coordination with NGOs, UNHCR has begun appointing liaison staff not only in the field, but also in the various regional bureaus at headquarters.

A manual, designed to give NGOs a clearer understanding of UNHCR's management of operations, should be available by the end of the year. A first draft has already been submitted to NGOs for comments. The final text will contain guidelines on various UNHCR procedures, including project submissions, sub-agreements, drafting of reports, project management, the UNHCR budgetary structure, and so forth.

"We are not questioning the goodwill of UNHCR," Blasco said. "UNHCR is receptive, understands the problems, and wants to do something. That's evident. But UNHCR is also part of a heavy machinery. How far can one go within the United Nations system? That remains to be seen."

Christiane Berthiaume

Bangladesh:

Cyclone alert!

Probably, somewhere, an editor used the headline: "Cyclone Hits Bangladesh: Not Many Killed."

In fact, many died – almost 200 Bangladeshis and Myanmar refugees on land, perhaps over 300 Myanmar and Thai fishermen at sea. However, considering the toll of the May 2 cyclone against the 138,000 killed in 1991, the difference was worth reporting.

But the number of deaths is immaterial: each death is pitiful, and nature's wanton destruction was cruel and arbitrary. Flying corrugated iron and debris, and falling trees, claimed many lives, and devastated more.

In the refugee camps housing almost 200,000 so-called "Rohingyas," there was a high proportion of deaths through dismemberment. In one camp, Kutupalong, which had been considered relatively safe, a tall tree fell on a densely populated shed area, killing 13. In that camp, some refugee families did not have enough cloth to adequately shroud the deceased; others were so desperate for shelter that they made makeshift huts up against the fallen trunk of the tree itself.

But the toll among refugees could have been much worse. The fact that it wasn't is due at least in part to the planning, coordination and hard work of various non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the government and UNHCR. The cyclone affected all of the 18 refugee camps which are supported by six international and two domestic NGOs. With uncanny accuracy it slammed against the seacoast, battering all the camps, which lie only a few kilometers from the Bay of Bengal.

Despite reported wind speeds of up to 250 kph when the cyclone made its landfall, the tidal surge which killed so many three years ago was not as severe. Thankfully, this cyclone hit against the tide, not with it. Moreover, the intensive cyclone shelter building program undertaken by many NGOs in the Cox's Bazar district after 1991 undoubtedly also saved many lives. The project is testimony to the coordination and teamwork between UNHCR and the NGOs working in Bangladesh, including MSF-France, MSF-Holland, OXFAM, Save the Children Fund-UK, World Concern, Terre des Hommes-Netherlands, Concern (Bangladesh), and Gonoshasthaya Kendra (Bangladesh).

But the refugee camps, built as temporary structures two years ago, were always bound to suffer. Their light, makeshift construction, corrugated iron roofs and exposed position on the hills of Cox's Bazar, put them at the mercy of this cruelest of natural phenomena. Almost every shed was damaged, power and water services were interrupted, roads were made inaccessible and food and other perishable relief items drenched.

> The toll among refugees could have been much worse.

The first response from the UNHCR Sub-Office at Cox's Bazar and its partner NGOs was planning. A cyclone preparedness plan had been developed over two years earlier. Emergency kits, including medicines, generators and other essential items were pre-positioned close to the refugee centers, and teams went to ride out the storm in each camp area.

Communications gear, provisions, shelter and transport were all arranged, with particular attention paid to the "preservation of management assets" – disaster jargon for putting everyone and everything in a safe place.

We were lucky that we had sufficient advance warning of the cyclone. On the morning of Sunday 1 May, the authorities hoisted the Signal 4 cyclone warning, and within two hours teams were on their way to the camps.

Once there, the teams advised local officials to take necessary precautions, and assisted wherever possible. In the town of Cox's Bazar, relief items were despatched, administrative arrangements were made for relocation of equipment, and a temporary radio installation was established to be shared with the Bangladesh relief department responsible for the refugees.

That evening the skies were calm. The following morning was overcast but still. A Signal 9 warning was raised at 9 a.m., and according to predetermined procedures, all staff were ordered to go to safe positions. This then became the most difficult period. We were trapped, unable to move, simply awaiting events for some seven hours until the cyclonic winds and rain began. It was only after another two to three hours that the effects were felt.

In the darkness, the wind howled. The noise of tearing and wrenching, stray screams and spray managed to penetrate every corner of our accommodation. By lamplight, in five different locations, staff members did

Destruction at a refugee camp in Bangladesh following the 2 May cyclone. The cyclone affected all 18 refugee camps supported by UNHCR and eight non-governmental organizations.

what they could to stay calm amid the chaos outside. They played cards, talked and sang through the night. Some tried to sleep. Others were unable to sit still, responding to uncontrollable adrenaline surges like frustrated children on a rainy day.

By midnight, the wind and rain had subsided. Desperate for information, we listened to the short-wave radio which could only tell us at half-hour intervals, that a cyclone had hit Cox's Bazar, but no reports of damage had been received. The teams in the south at Teknaf had been virtually immobilized; for them, progress north was only possible on foot.

But in the central coast and further north we were able to set out before 2 a.m., negotiating fallen trees and litter on the road, gradually beating a path to all the camps, cutting our way through fallen teak and rubber plantations.

By 3 a.m., four camps had been contacted. As dawn broke, the fury of the storm became evident: many maturing teak trees had fallen, or snapped in the middle like matchsticks. No further contact could be made with other camps until 7 a.m., when an advance party on foot was able to reach five camps in the central region.

Although the danger was still officially Signal 9, it was clear that the storm had passed. As we approached each camp, amidst the appalling debris of bamboo, thatch and corrugated iron, an intense hubbub of human activity was the most reassuring sound imaginable.

The refugees themselves were establishing makeshift shelters everywhere, restoring order to their lives, reconnecting their existence. We needed this reminder that refugees are as resourceful and capable as any other group of humans, and their hopefulness and cheerfulness as they set about this task brought restoring energy.

By midday, all camps had been contacted, every immediate need had been identified, and food was already on its way.

The camps were lucky that water facilities remained largely unaffected. Shelter and food were tended to and medical teams were working in each camp. Severe cases were transferred to local hospitals. The only remaining task to be initiated was the re-establishment of sanitation facilities.

In the days that followed, the local authorities were able to clear the roads, emergency food was delivered until regular distributions could be resumed, sanitation and water were normalized, and all medical cases were under treatment. After five days, there was no longer any need to refer to an emergency, the slower and more deliberate process of reconstruction could start. The surrounding Bangladeshi population was also severely affected, and UNHCR decided to provide an amount equal to 10 percent of the refugee relief to these people.

Mopping up was an organizational nightmare for all concerned, but in the end the relief effort was as well-conceived and executed as any ever undertaken in Bangladesh.

George Lombard

Afghan Initiatives

Afghanistan is one of the poorest and least developed countries in the world. During the 1980s, a third of the population – over six million people – became refugees. Until the late 1980s, there were virtually no local Afghan NGOs. By 1994 there were hundreds. Nancy Dupree describes the phenomenal growth of the Afghan NGO.

"I felt I must leave my village," said the young Afghan doctor. "It was too shameful to bear." We were sitting in his neat clinic in the center of Zena Khan's one-street bazaar nestled among khaki-colored mountains in Ghazni province in eastern Afghanistan. We had arrived here over a track which an Afghan NGO had just finished upgrading so that vehicles could reach outlying villages. During the war this road had been a foot trail used by Afghan resistance fighters carrying weapons for their battles against Soviet and government forces manning the main Kabul-Ghazni highway an hour to the west.

The doctor was describing how he felt when his clinic fell victim to reductions brought on by a general curtailment of NGO funds from international sources. He had been trained by one NGO, and set up with a clinic by another, only to be summarily informed that no further support was forthcoming. "I simply could not make the people understand," he said. "How could a mother with a sick child understand that far-away people had suddenly decided I should no longer have the means to help her?"

Happily, a locally based Afghan NGO came to the clinic's rescue, drawing on a special fund obtained from hiring out threshing machines. Although the money was limited, it was enough to provide start-up rent for two narrow bazaar shops, one to be used as a store and the other as a clinic divided into three spaces: a front waiting-room with a floor of washed gravel, and a central consultation room curtained off from the examining room at the back.

The doctor charges fees in cash or kind since the Afghan NGO cannot afford to pay him a salary. As a result, this isolated area now has access to basic health facilities for the first time.

This story illustrates a number of advantages of local NGOs: sensitive on-the-spot staff motivated to respond to emergency needs, independent decision-making, one-time assistance for sustainable enterprises, flexibility in the use of limited funds, and the willingness to think creatively in solving problems together with the community.

Such NGOs, however, are new phenomena in Afghanistan, even though Afghans have traditionally respected Islamic injunctions emphasizing both individual and community obligations toward the welfare of communities.

Before the war that began in 1978, Afghan governments asserted their right to impose *zakat* – a portion of wealth bestowed in alms (a duty incumbent upon every Muslim) – as a tax for social welfare. However, their insistence on controlling all institutionalized welfare precluded the establishment of organizations conforming with western definitions of what constitutes an NGO.

The war gave birth to new types of welfare bodies, but most were inexorably tied to the promotion of political parties. Not until 1988 did international agencies begin to encourage Afghans to form their own NGOs to help implement services within liberated rural areas known as "zones of tranquility." It was hoped that by making life more habitable inside Afghanistan these projects would stem the flood of thousands of refugees streaming daily into Pakistan and Iran.

These projects functioned largely outside any government network since the Pakistan-based Afghan Interim Government, artificially created in February 1989, was never effective. The fledgling Afghan NGOs were seen by some as artificial creations of foreign funding, for initially most of them had no roots in the communities they sought to serve. Still, hundreds of Afghans employed with international NGOs gained experience and benefited from the training they received.

Nevertheless, there were problems. Without indigenous models from the past to guide them, many local Afghan NGO personnel adhered to attitudes and working methods better suited to government bureaucracies, academia, businesses or political parties. Frequently deficient in administrative skills, weak in professional competency, and negligent in adequate reporting, these local NGOs failed to win the trust of donors.

This led to unreliable and increasingly meager funding. The U.N. system, including UNHCR and the United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Assistance Relating to Afghanistan (UNOCHA), has provided 80% of the $4-5 million channelled to Afghan NGOs over the past few years, with foreign governments and international NGOs contributing the remainder.

It is hard to say just how many local Afghan NGOs exist today. Estimates range between 200 and 700! Of these 60 or 70 are genuinely effective. Others lead amorphous existences. As the euphoria over the withdrawal of Soviet troops in 1989 and the establishment of the Islamic State of Afghanistan in April 1992 dissipated in the face of continued factional fighting, international funding declined. Drastic cuts followed.

Paradoxically, the number of Afghan NGOs has steadily increased. Many spin-offs from defunct foreign

NGOs joined those Afghan NGOs with conscience which seek accountability within the communities where they work. By contrast, scores of new groups, calling themselves NGOs, came into being as contracted implementers of projects designed by others. Afghans derisively label these as "briefcase NGOs."

Briefcase NGOs have few meaningful links with communities and are seldom genuinely interested in humanitarian goals or long-term prospects. But their leaders, having commandeered large stocks of heavy machinery when the former regime collapsed, are well equipped to implement projects, although they often lack professional expertise. Thus, like common contractors, they must seek skilled labor.

The briefcase NGOs often turn to genuine Afghan NGOs for expertise. The latter are mostly small, lack adequate machinery and need more income. By hiring themselves out to briefcase NGOs in their desperate search for funds, however, they attract the accusation that they are acting as contractors themselves. This damages their credibility.

On the plus side, however, there are hundreds of superbly qualified professionals now working with local Afghan NGOs. These people, having eschewed the temptations of resettlement, are dedicating their lives to their nation's reconstruction. They plan and manage complex programs with proficient competence.

Growing numbers of Afghan NGOs maintain close personal links to communities, patiently taking the time to establish rapport over countless cups of tea. They coordinate regionally, introducing integrated rural development schemes with long-term objectives.

They work in all sectors, including road repair, irrigation, agriculture, health and formal, non-formal and vocational education. However, before many of these projects can get underway, the countryside must first be cleared of mines. The Afghan de-mining programs, the world's largest, are carried out directly by local Afghan NGOs, together with UNOCHA.

Because they are small, many local Afghan NGOs can afford to be creative. Amputees in Jalalabad in the eastern province of Nangarhar are taught to ride bicycles so they may attend schools and go to work. Other disabled in the Panjshir Valley, some 65 miles north of Kabul, are taught vocational trades such as welding, carpentry and shoe-making. At several centers throughout Afghanistan, young men who neglected formal education while fighting in the resistance are taught to repair bicycles, vehicles and radios. All these Afghan NGO programs help rebuild the economy while providing services for the 2.7 million refugees who have returned from Pakistan and Iran to their towns and villages where the bazaars are rapidly coming back to life.

Afghan NGOs are also active in eliciting local participation in projects. Social workers trained in Peshawar, Pakistan, have returned to their homes in the north and west where they encourage communities to identify local resources instead of depending entirely on outside assistance. In Kunar province, north of Jalalabad, local khans have donated land for schools built by local masons and staffed by volunteer teachers, many of whom received training with Afghan NGOs working among the refugees in Peshawar. International NGOs supply the books and other educational materials.

In Logar province, south of Kabul, Afghan NGO engineers work with communities to erect flood-control structures to restrain spring floods which wash away farmland and deposit sand on fertile soil. South of Logar, at Shash Qala in Wardak province, an agricultural experimental center which, among other things, rents tractors and threshers to farmers, also helps fill the information vacuum by producing simple text books on how to establish orchards, grow better wheat and combat plant diseases. These texts are particularly useful to Afghan NGOs like one in Andar, north of the Hindu Kush, which has distributed millions of saplings of improved varieties of apricots, walnuts, almonds, plums, and peaches in order to revive fruit and nut exports which were the mainstay of Afghanistan's export economy before the war.

Further west, at Taghori in Ghazni province, an Afghan NGO headed by an Afghan woman doctor has built a 200-bed hospital, equipped it with contributions from an international NGO and staffed it with men and women trained at her clinic in Quetta, capital of Pakistan's Baluchistan province. Women health care professionals also staff mobile mother-child clinics from their base near Jalalabad. And in Laghman, north-west of Jalalabad, women living in high mountain valleys are learning how to keep bees and poultry as well as how to better care for goats and sheep. These women pass on one-third of the new-born chicks, kids and lambs to other women to keep the project going.

Various Afghan NGOs have established animal husbandry projects throughout almost every province. In addition to widespread vaccination programs, attention is also given to introducing improved breeds and setting up micro-dairies. The scope of Afghan NGO activities is imaginative and endless, and Afghan field workers periodically hold regional conferences to share ideas and overall objectives.

Ongoing political instability means the present central government cannot provide purposeful direction for reconstruction strategies. Local Afghan NGOs now carry this responsibility. When peace returns, what will be their role? Future Afghan governments would be wise to capitalize on the ever-growing experience of local NGOs, if they wish to see the evolution of an infrastructure that truly serves all of Afghanistan's diverse and, in many cases, severely traumatized communities.

Nancy Hatch Dupree
Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR)

Many former East Bloc countries were unfamiliar with refugee issues, but are now faced with increasing numbers of asylum-seekers. Here, a Hungarian NGO distributes assistance to refugees from former Yugoslavia in the town of Nagyharsány.

NGOs breaking new ground in former East Bloc

After decades of state control over nearly every aspect of life, the emergence of non-governmental organizations in the former East Bloc has been a slow and sometimes painful process.

But dedicated citizens in several former communist countries are now accepting the challenge of building an independent network of local voluntary agencies to deal with a wide range of humanitarian and social issues that were formerly the sole responsibility of the welfare state.

And in many of these countries, governments are doing whatever they can to foster the growth of NGOs despite a natural inclination – developed over decades of centralized rule – to mistrust any grass roots movement.

Speaking at the regional Partnership in Action (PARinAC) Conference for Europe in Budapest in April, Hungarian President Arpad Goncz said governments are going to have to learn to live with independent NGOs.

"I must confess that the institu-

tion of NGOs is not very old in this eastern part of Europe," Goncz said. "After all, there was an idea that developed over 40 years of communism that every task, every duty, should be handled by the government. And governments will now have to learn to coexist with NGOs, to cooperate with them and to look at grass roots movements without suspicion..."

Hungary provides an excellent example of this healthy new relationship between governments and NGOs. Goncz paid tribute to his country's new NGOs and acknowledged that their independence was a major asset.

"By taking an active part in running day-to-day affairs, [NGOs] are playing a bigger role than state or government bodies," he said. "They know the local circumstances, they are part of the recipient communities and their work is more human, more warm-hearted than that of any major organization or institution."

But despite some progress, UNHCR has found that the development of NGOs dealing specifically with refugee issues in the former East Bloc is hampered by the lack of any asylum tradition. Before 1989, the few refugees in the region were generally Communist Party members fearing persecution in their homelands – a very small number of people. Otherwise, borders were largely closed.

Today, however, Central and Eastern Europe – as well as the former Soviet Union – are unable to avoid the global refugee and migration crisis. Like much of the rest of Europe, they are confronted by an increasing number of asylum-seekers. As a result, UNHCR has increased its presence throughout the region and has been forced to go out and find and then nurture and train local NGO partners to help with the growing case load. This "institution-building" has not been easy.

"Because of the growing numbers of asylum-seekers, UNHCR can't afford to just sit back and wait for the spontaneous creation of NGOs here," said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR's liaison officer in Bratislava, Slovakia. "We have had to go out and help the very few, very small NGOs that are already here, to provide them with the means to function.

"Because of the growing numbers of asylum-seekers, UNHCR can't afford to just sit back and wait for the spontaneous creation of NGOs here. We have to go out and help provide them with the means to function."

"The other option would have been to bring in West European NGOs," Cochetel said. "But they are not familiar with the region, with the attitudes, with the languages, and so it was not a viable solution. So now we are working with local partners who are able to really help those people who need international protection."

In much of the region, the new NGOs have arisen from two main sources that existed – often precariously – under the former communist governments: semi-independent church groups and human rights organizations. In countries without these two sources of dedicated volunteers, the process of building NGOs has been much more difficult.

Moreover, the growth of capitalism and the search for individual wealth have made it difficult for many NGOs to attract qualified staff.

In Bulgaria, for example, UNHCR is trying to develop an NGO legal assistance project but has had difficulty attracting lawyers because they can find much better opportunities in the private sector. "It seems human rights are mainly a preoccupation for people in rich countries," one UNHCR staff member said.

To foster the introduction and growth of local NGOs in Eastern and Central Europe, UNHCR supports the activities of the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE), a non-governmental organization that promotes human rights and the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers throughout the continent. Established in 1973, ECRE links more than 60 West European NGOs involved in asylum work. One of ECRE's major objectives in 1994-95 is to strengthen participation of NGOs from the countries of Southern, Central and Eastern Europe.

Bill Seary, ECRE's development officer for Central and Eastern Europe, said his organization's activities in the region include:

- Staff exchanges to enable NGO workers from the region to learn from their counterparts in the West;
- Support for national and regional training programs for NGO staff in Central and Eastern Europe involved in legal and other assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers;
- And the exchange of information on the treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers through the European Legal Network on Asylum (Elena) and ECRE resource specialists.

Seary says the rationale behind ECRE's program stems from the rapidly changing asylum system throughout Europe, and the need to incorporate Central and East European countries in the pan-European human rights framework.

"The future will see an increase in the numbers of applicants for asylum in the region as a consequence of ... various bilateral and ▶

▶ multilateral readmission agreements, and because of other measures taken by European governments, including the introduction of expeditious procedures to return asylum-seekers to so-called 'safe third countries,'" Seary said.

Among other recommendations, the April meeting of PARinAC in Budapest called on UNHCR and NGOs to exercise their advocacy roles with governments in Eastern and Central Europe and the Newly Independent States (NIS) of the former Soviet Union for the protection of civil, economic and cultural rights of minority groups in the region. PARinAC also declared that training is of "utmost importance" and requested UNHCR to expand its training programs for refugee-related NGOs in the region.

It is a major challenge, but "institution-building" has already begun in many former East Bloc countries.

• RUSSIA

There are no official statistics on NGOs in Russia, but they are thought to number in the thousands. Relatively few of them, however, deal with refugees and asylum-seekers, an issue which most Russians know little about.

"Before the transition from the old system, there were few NGOs," said Vera Soboleva, UNHCR public information officer in Moscow. "The overwhelming majority of Russians were members of various trade unions, and through them they tried to solve their problems. There wasn't even any legislation on NGOs."

Currently, UNHCR's Moscow office works with a variety of local NGOs in both the protection and assistance fields. A major partner is the Coordination Council for Aid to Refugees and Forced Migrants (CCARFM), which coordinates the efforts of 26 local NGOs and 47 individuals. So far, CCARFM has been involved mainly in programs for refugees and forced migrants from the NIS. However, it will soon expand to activities for non-NIS refugees as well.

Another local NGO, Lorien, provides medical care for asylum-seekers in four accommodation centers and a clinic in the Moscow region. The St. Petersburg Red Cross operates a soup kitchen and provides legal advice, medical care and social services to asylum-seekers. The Russian Foundation for Assistance to Refugees, which has 32 regional and territorial branches around the country, will soon cooperate with UNHCR on a project in the Pskov region of Russia. UNHCR also works closely with the Russian Red Cross and is developing ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, Caritas and the local office of the International Catholic Migration Commission.

"The overwhelming majority of Russians were members of various trade unions, and through them they tried to solve their problems. There wasn't even any legislation on NGOs."

UNHCR Moscow has organized a monthly coordination meeting for NGOs and government agencies responsible for refugees, including the Federal Migration Service.

• BULGARIA

There is no NGO tradition in Bulgaria, but a recent influx of people fleeing the fighting in former Yugoslavia has prompted the Bulgarian Red Cross – in cooperation with UNHCR – to strengthen its work among refugees and asylum-seekers. In addition, UNHCR has proposed an assistance program to foster development of refugee protection programs within the Bulgarian Lawyers for Human Rights (BLHR), an NGO formed in 1993 to provide legal defense in human rights cases. BLHR also provides training and human rights information to other NGOs and lawyers.

• ROMANIA

The lack of acceptable refugee registration and status determination procedures in Romania has prompted UNHCR to reinforce its cooperation with two national human rights NGOs which are involved in actual refugee protection activities. They are the Romanian Independent Society for Human Rights (SIRDO), and the Association for the Defense of Human Rights in Romania (APADOR).

From its refugee office in Bucharest, SIRDO works in the areas of supplementary feeding, shelter, health, community services and education. It also sends field teams to government accommodation centers for refugees. APADOR is involved in legal services and representation for refugees.

• HUNGARY

Hungary is the only former East Bloc country to have signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees before the collapse of communism. In addition, it had previous experience in the 1980s in dealing with asylum-seekers from Romania, which provided early experience for two local NGOs – the Hungarian Red Cross and Hungarian Inter-Church Aid. These NGOs work in both emergency and long-term assistance for refugees and asylum-seekers. Prospects are good for further strong development of local NGOs in Hungary.

• CZECH REPUBLIC

The Czech Republic is another success story in building new NGOs. When UNHCR opened its office in Prague in 1992, there were very few NGOs apart from the local Helsinki Committee, which had been active

in refugee matters since 1989. Unable to find enough implementing partners, UNHCR set to work organizing individuals who were already doing some volunteer work with refugees and asylum-seekers.

Today, several NGOs are working with UNHCR. The Czech Helsinki Committee and another NGO, Society of Citizens, provide legal services for refugees and asylum-seekers. The Organization for Aid to Refugees – OPU – focuses on local integration, including workshops, vocational training and assisting refugee children in gaining access to secondary education. It also produces a magazine by and for refugees. Another NGO, Man, Education and New Technologies, offers general training programs in social issues and is conducting a survey on Czech attitudes toward immigrants and ethnic minorities, including refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR is helping to design the questionnaire that will be used in the survey.

• SLOVAKIA

Six local NGOs are currently working in Slovakia with UNHCR, which has provided material, technical, political and financial support for their development since 1993. The NGOs include Caritas Slovakia (social counseling); Freedom (legal services); OPU, Matica Slovenska, Helsinki Federation and Charta 77.

Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR's liaison officer in Bratislava, said the most difficult task has been getting local lawyers to work on behalf of refugees. Cochetel said few local lawyers are interested in helping NGOs because they can make more money in the private sector. In addition, some lawyers fear they could damage their reputations by representing "foreigners." So far, only one local lawyer has agreed to represent asylum-seekers on behalf of an NGO.

Even so, Cochetel is optimistic. "We have motivated and enthusiastic partners, and the quality of their work is rapidly improving," he said. "The role local NGOs can play on behalf of refugees is beginning to be recognized."

• POLAND

Before 1989, the Polish Red Cross Society was the only organization assisting the few refugees present in Poland. With the development of democratic institutions, a growing number of organizations were established to deal with social and humanitarian issues. Today, about 10 NGOs are working with refugees – three of them as UNHCR implementing partners. They are the Polish Red Cross, the Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, and Polish EquiLibre Foundation.

"When we opened the office in January 1992, I soon realized that UNHCR did not have the capacity to provide legal counselling to refugees and asylum-seekers," said Daniel Endres, UNHCR liaison officer in Poland. "The Polish Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights was already working successfully for the protection and monitoring of the rights of individuals, so I asked them to provide legal counselling and support to asylum-seekers and refugees. Today, two lawyers and a human rights expert are counselling refugees on a daily basis."

The Polish Red Cross has provided assistance to a large number of asylum-seekers from former Yugoslavia.

EquiLibre also provides assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers who do not receive government support, and has launched an education program at more than 450 schools which includes a presentation of the problems faced by refugees.

Recently, Polish Caritas has begun counseling services for refugees and asylum-seekers in selected cities.

UNHCR / S. Hopkins

Clothes are distributed to refugees from former Yugoslavia in Nagyharsány, Hungary.

Sylvie Daillot
Charles-Antoine Hofmann
Rebecca Stevens

Relief International:

Small is beautiful

Relief International delivers more than its name implies. This small, young humanitarian agency recently launched a quiet crusade of empowerment in Azerbaijan and Tajikistan. It brings not only relief to the refugees, returnees and displaced in these countries, but also ways for them to win back their pride and self-esteem.

Farshad Rastegar, 33, founded Relief International (R.I.) in June 1990 when an earthquake in his native Iran sparked a spontaneous community response in Los Angeles to organize relief shipments to the quake victims. Four years and several relief projects later, community response and local-level involvement are still the keys to its success. And today, R.I. provides an excellent example of how a young non-governmental organization (NGO) with realistic and clearly defined goals can make a significant contribution in the worldwide effort to help refugees to help themselves. In R.I.'s case, small is indeed beautiful.

"We look at relief as developmental, not surgical, so from the beginning we have involved the community at all levels," said Rastegar, who serves as executive director of the Los Angeles-based private relief organization providing medical and humanitarian assistance to victims of natural and man-made disasters.

Rastegar, who was writing his dissertation in comparative and international education at the University of California, Los Angeles, at the time of the Iran earthquake, said the disaster brought together many different religious and political elements of the Iranian community in Los Angeles, convincing him of the wealth of opportunities and resources that existed on the West Coast of the United States.

"There seemed to be a dearth of international relief organizations on the West Coast," explained Rastegar, who has been living in the United States for 19 years. "But at the same time a large pool of people, who were part of the international community, or even former refugees themselves, were just waiting to be tapped into."

With a base of some 50 volunteers, R.I. organized additional relief shipments to the Kurds in northern Iraq in 1991, and to Azerbaijan in 1992 to aid the victims of the conflict between that country and Armenia over the disputed enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh. "We felt that these areas, particularly Iran and Azerbaijan, were not receiving the international attention they deserved," Rastegar said, "and that these gaps in the relief pipeline could be filled by the community on both ends."

In September 1993, R.I. shifted its focus from organizing relief shipments in the United States, to

UNHCR R. Rennie

Relief International and UNHCR are among supporters of a local stove-making project in Yevlakh, Azerbaijan. The stoves are one-tenth the price of those bought elsewhere in Europe.

distributing supplies and organizing relief operations within countries of need. After conducting a needs assessment in Azerbaijan, R.I. realized that the traditional relief delivery system there was not reaching a large number of the displaced. Many of the 900,000 refugees and displaced people in Azerbaijan have never reached organized camps, but rather are living in their own make-shift shelters in remote areas.

"When R.I. started in Azerbaijan, we had to take a different approach than some traditional relief agencies," explained Rastegar. "Instead of waiting for refugees and displaced peoples to come seeking help, we went out to find them."

And "finding them" is what R.I. does best. Through mobile health units, R.I. provides primary health care to some 25,000 displaced people a month in Azerbaijan. Reaching some of the most inaccessible regions in the country, R.I., which recently became an implementing partner with UNHCR, also transports and distributes up to 300 metric tons of donated food and non-food items monthly.

"To get to some of these places, you really rely on the motivation of your staff... they have to think of it as more than just a job," Rastegar said.

A key element of R.I.'s in-country operations in both Azerbaijan and Tajikistan is the hiring of local staff to fill key positions at all levels of the operation. Sixty-one of R.I.'s 65 staff members in Azerbaijan are Azeri, and many of them have managerial positions. Because of this, many staff members think of R.I. as an Azeri organization, rather than an outside international agency, and therefore are willing to "go the extra mile," says Rastegar.

That commitment is evident in the Azerbaijan town of Yevlakh, where every morning several mobile health teams composed of Azeri doctors and nurses set out from the R.I. compound bound for remote camps and settlements of people displaced by the war. Altogether, R.I.'s roving teams provide medical care at 160 centers for displaced people in eight districts of Azerbaijan.

"These are all Azeri doctors and medical staff and they are highly professional people, many of them specialists," said Jill Hoffmann, of R.I.-Azerbaijan. "Because of the war and the economic problems, many of them were unable to use their skills. So this program is good for them, good for the people, and good for Azerbaijan."

Another key element of R.I.'s operation in Azerbaijan allows the displaced population to earn not only money, but also self-esteem. Through R.I.-sponsored workshops last year, displaced Azeris produced more than 10,000 heaters and some 10,000 water canisters for distribution to other displaced persons. The heaters cost one-tenth of what UNHCR would pay to import them from Western Europe.

Relief International will sponsor similar income-generating activities next year in Azerbaijan, and in its most recent venue, Tajikistan. R.I. has been operating in Tajikistan since April 1994 with a staff of 12, running mobile health clinics to areas where recent returnees are rebuilding whole communities. In other parts of Tajikistan, R.I. trains local medical assistants and midwives in existing rural clinics.

R.I. chose Tajikistan because of what they saw as a paucity of services and a plethora of needs. Again, the philosophy driving R.I.'s efforts in Tajikistan is one of development and local capacity-building. "You want to do more than just put a bandage on a wound," said Rastegar. "You want to resolve their long-term problems by involving the local community at every step."

"You don't always have to bring international aid in," he continued. "Often the resources are already there, and much money could be saved in the process."

Rastegar believes this sort of thinking has been the key to his young organization's success so far.

> "Instead of waiting for refugees and displaced people to come seeking help, we went out to find them."

Just four years old, Relief International currently has a budget of $1.5 million, funded by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Soros Foundation, UNHCR, and various private and corporate donors.

But, he says, R.I.'s short history has not been without its share of obstacles and frustrations. One instance in particular has really stuck in Rastegar's mind as illustrating the frustration his organization and other relief agencies unavoidably face from time to time.

On one particularly cold and wet day last year, Rastegar was traveling with a mobile health unit distributing a limited number of blankets in a remote part of Azerbaijan. They were down to their last two blankets when he came upon a dilapidated, make-shift shelter. A very old woman, her husband and their two grandchildren sat shivering inside, but he had only one blanket to give them. He said being able to leave only one blanket was one of the most difficult things he's ever had to do.

"We are doing something, but there is still so much more we could do," he said.

R.I. hopes to do more in the coming year, including building schools and training teachers in Azerbaijan, and strengthening its rapid emergency response capacity by preparing teams of doctors to be ready at a moment's notice.

Heather Courtney

Swaziland:

Bright spot in Africa

UNHCR and its NGO partners in Swaziland recently said farewell to the final group of Mozambican refugees to voluntarily return home. UNHCR Representative Gary Perkins, writing from Mbabane, takes a fond look back at his time in Swaziland.

SEPTEMBER 1992

The image is a familiar one. There is a long line of people, mostly women and children waiting under a blue sky. At the far end of the line aid workers are handing out the daily ration of maize meal, with perhaps some powdered milk for the children. Looking at the scene you can almost feel the heat and the despair.

This is the image of the African refugee as conveyed nightly on television screens around the world. But it does not have to be like that. And it is not always the case, as I learned when I came to Swaziland in 1992.

I arrived feeling rather like a character in the Graham Green novel, "A Burnt Out Case." I had just spent two years working in Somalia. It was certainly a pleasure to negotiate with people who did not habitually carry an AK-47.

Swaziland is home to some 50,000 refugees, the vast majority of whom come from Mozambique. They arrive with almost nothing seeking a respite from the civil war in their own country. They find, however, the principal condition for human dignity – peace – and more often than not, courtesy and help. They also find queues, but they are mercifully short and they do move forward.

There are two principal settlement areas for refugees in Swaziland. The first is Ndzevane, which is a mixed settlement of South Africans and Mozambicans and is now closed for new arrivals. The second is Malindza, which has some 18,000 Mozambican refugees.

They are referred to as refugee camps, but they are in reality small towns which contain the largest primary schools in Swaziland. They are open settlements and the fence around Malindza is more to keep out the local cattle than keep in the refugees. Both camps have an "open-door policy" and many of the refugees work in the surrounding area.

New arrivals in Malindza are first given food. Generally, they report to police stations after they enter the country and are then transported to the camp by the police. Yes, Swazi police do have transport and a police station in Swaziland is a place where you go to receive help, not intimidation. The people are then interviewed and entered into the UNHCR database, which contains individual records on all of the 24,000 persons registered in the two camps.

Following a distribution of cooking utensils and clothing and blankets, their first night in Swaziland is spent in one of the "permanent tents" for new arrivals. And they talk; slowly at first, but with increasing animation as others gather round to hear news of events inside Mozambique or to search for relatives or friends.

The entire process of establishing themselves takes about six weeks. Each family is given 700 square meters of land. They first construct a pit latrine using an established design. It has a concrete floor and proper walls. Once this has been completed and inspected, they receive materials for the house which is built of wood from the abundant forests in Swaziland and with iron sheets for roofs.

The camp was designed to be a series of small villages, each containing about 200 people. It is not set out in a square grid pattern, but has lots of curves and green areas and playing fields. There are trees from a central nursery and the individual gardens can be impressive. There is a "Maputo," with 200 people, and a "Belavista." All the old names from home are there even though some of the refugees left their villages over eight years ago. As a refugee camp it succeeds admirably. As a small town in Swaziland, it is a bustling community. All in all, it feels good to be here.

> It was certainly a pleasure to negotiate with people who did not habitually carry an AK-47.

UNHCR/P. Mesurac

Every week from October 1993 to June 1994, a train carried happy Mozambican refugees home from exile in Swaziland.

JUNE 1994

The vast majority of the houses are empty, roofs are gone and the mud walls are beginning to crumble. The schools closed two months ago, and while the water points still provide clean water, there are only a few scattered individuals using them. There is still one shop which can provide an ice cold soft drink straight from the freezer. But the man who painted, "Thank you U.N. for giving us peace" on the wall of his store, and was thus greatly loved by UNHCR photographers, is gone.

A picture of despair? Not at all. For the last year, a well-organized repatriation has been taking place to Mozambique. Each week since October 1993, a passenger train has been leaving Swaziland carrying some 700 people home to Mozambique. The advantages of having a "repatriation train" are many. People travel in comfort and security and they can take almost everything they want. And they do take everything. Starting with a mythical 50 kilos per person, the refugees, intelligent people that they are, soon realized that we did not really mind the excess weight. Off came the roofs and the roof beams of their houses, and onto the train they went. After a certain amount of bureaucratic nervousness on the part of staff, we soon concluded that the more they took home, the more likely people were to resettle permanently. With each baggage car capable of carrying 25,000 kilos, weight was really not a problem. The last major advantage of using a train is very simple: the children love it.

And what about those of us who were left behind? That is the staff of UNHCR and the voluntary agencies. We are both happy and sad. Happy that with a lot of hard work and tremendous cooperation between the government, UNHCR, Lutheran World Federation, Caritas, the International Organization for Migration, Goal and many others, we managed to complete a very successful and decent repatriation. Happy that the refugees were so obviously glad to be going home. Sad that a very creative two years of our lives is over and that the weeds are starting to grow in the streets of Malindza and Ndzavane.

On 3 June 1994, at 10 a.m., the "Last Train from Mpaka" left for Mozambique carrying a combination of refugees, aid workers, dignitaries and press. There was much happiness and just a little sadness as the locomotive sounded its whistle and the last of the refugees headed down the tracks for home. All is not bleak in Africa.

GARY PERKINS

NGO self-coordination

Coordination is a value-laden word. It often causes a knee-jerk reaction from those who have no wish to be "controlled" or swamped by interminable layers of bureaucracy. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in particular have traditionally resisted institutionalized co-operation among each other, though this may be changing. The last decade has seen a discernible shift in favor of closer, more routine cooperation among those who deal with the ever increasing demands of humanitarian assistance.

Partly, this is a necessary response to the sheer scale of the operations underway. NGOs collectively spend an estimated $9-10 billion annually, reaching some 250 million people living in absolute poverty. International governments increasingly channel resources, especially for emergencies, through their favored NGOs rather than allegedly less accountable governments of the South. In several emergencies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, short-term money available to NGOs – albeit mostly to international NGOs – surpassed even that of the United Nations. NGOs are now the front-line forces of "neutral" intervention and are more closely linked to the United Nations, EC and donor governments than ever before. This could not have been foreseen in the days when NGOs simply filled the gaps at a grass-roots level. As the number of crises demanding our attention increases, so too does the number of new NGOs willing to meet that demand. The international safety net of voluntary assistance has never been so buoyant.

However, the phenomenal increase in the number, size and financial status of NGOs in the 1980s and 1990s has to a large extent happened without close inspection of their actual performance. For all their laudable success, some NGOs have been guilty of poor practice, wastage and a lack of professionalism which to a large extent has gone unchecked. They tend to throw a veil of secrecy over actions that would not stand up to public scrutiny, and NGO programs are rarely evaluated independently. Critics of NGOs have pointed to a lack of accountability, mutual competitiveness and poor coordination as perhaps the three most serious charges levelled at the so-called Third Sector. Alarm has also been expressed about the fact that some NGOs have "crowded out" governments by offering better resources and salaries and, in some cases, have made little secret of their wish to replace government structures. Another serious charge is that Northern NGOs have failed to transfer skills to any significant degree to their Southern counterparts.

Over the past year, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA) has confronted some of these charges head on. ICVA's significant membership in the South is demanding that far more attention be payed to building local capacities, even during emergencies where the tendency has been to bypass developmental principles in favor of rapid responses dominated by Northern capital and Northern agencies. The so-called relief to development continuum, much favored in the PARinAC process, is still only at the blueprint stage. The signs are, however, that donors will be increasingly receptive to channelling money through Southern NGOs in the future as part of an attempt to bolster local institutions, the guardians of civil society.

As a contribution to this process, ICVA has looked specifically at NGO coordination bodies and their role in promoting a more efficient space in which NGOs can collectively exert influence, especially during an emergency. In a forthcoming book, comparisons are drawn between eight case studies from around the world. Although the size and sophistication of NGO coordination bodies vary considerably, a number of common themes emerged. In Lebanon, Ethiopia, Afghanistan and Mozambique, for instance, the NGO coordination bodies have been instrumental in bringing the NGO community into close dialogue with U.N. agencies. They have also developed local codes of conduct for NGOs, including very specific guidelines for health, agriculture and food delivery programs. Most importantly, the coordination bodies have mapped out where and in what sectors the NGOs work, thus minimizing the duplication of projects.

ICVA will continue its program of support for NGO coordination bodies, especially those umbrella organizations formed by local NGOs in developing countries. A handbook on how to set up such bodies is now available and training programs will soon be underway. Behind these initiatives lies the belief that if NGOs as a community have something unique to offer, then a greater degree of NGO coordination at field level is crucial in realizing that potential. The U.N.'s own coordinating role in emergencies will be better served by having a representative NGO umbrella body that it can relate to. Coordination "owned" by NGOs is not a bureaucratic imposition designed to stifle the independence and imagination of individual NGOs; it is a tool for increasing the effectiveness of a collective endeavour. The challenge is to design a structure conducive to strengthening cooperation without limiting the freedom of any one participant.

Jon Bennet
ICVA

Some useful models and training resources are available from: ICVA UK Office, 84 Sandfield Rd, Oxford OX3 7RL, United Kingdom, Tel/fax: 44 865 69206,or from, ICVA Main Office, P.O. Box 216, 1211 Geneva 21, Switzerland. Fax: 41 22 738-9904.

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WHAT'S WRONG HERE?

Look at this nice happy people.

Notice that each one has something: a tool or implement here, a bicycle or a briefcase there. All completely normal and unremarkable.

But wait. Something's amiss. That nice fellow near the bottom – third row down, second from the right. He doesn't seem to have anything.

Indeed. You see, he's a refugee.

And as you can see, refugees are just like you and me except for one thing: everything they once had has been destroyed or taken away, probably at gunpoint. Home, family, possessions, all gone.

They have nothing.

And nothing is all they'll ever have unless we help.

Of course, you can't give them back what's been destroyed, and we're not asking for money (though every penny helps). But we are asking you to keep an open mind. And a smile of welcome.

It may not seem much. But to a refugee it can mean everything.

UNHCR is a strictly humanitarian organization funded only by voluntary contributions. Currently it is responsible for more than 23 million refugees around the world.

UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Models courtesy of the LEGO Group.

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